



Professors speak out on First Amendment limitations

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In recent months, the Cato Institute conducted a survey asking questions concerning freedom of speech and specific questions as to what kinds of speech Americans believe should or shouldn't be protected by the government.

Out of the 2,300 who took the survey, 59 percent said that citizens should have the ability to express opinions in public, even if they are offensive or widely unpopular. The remaining 41 percent said that the government should have a say in preventing hate speech, specifically if the speech involves racial division.

With that said, 2017 was a momentous year in the subject of freedom of speech and the right to assembly. With USA Today reporting more than two million nationwide attendees at the Women's March in January of 2017 alone, the ability to ignore such large expressions of freedom of speech is becoming more and more difficult. Countless protests on topics such as racism, laws and human rights have taken place over the past year.

In order to discuss the issues surrounding freedom of speech, the School of Religion made it the main topic in their Roundtable event. The Roundtable hosted various panelists to open the conversation of freedom of speech and assembly on Lee's campus.

The Roundtable forum events are hosted, according to host and professor of theological ethics Dr. Daniela Augustine, as a means of providing students with more opportunities to hear and discuss the issues in our society and our responsibility as citizens.

"We have a privilege in this country," Augustine said. "It is to be cherished and for us also to be stewards of this privilege responsibly."

The discussion took place on Thursday, Feb. 8, and featured four professionals with varying research specialties — each bringing a different perspective to the discussion.

Dr. Tom Pope, associate professor in political science, shared the importance of recognizing the fine line between peaceful protest and fighting words.

“When some injustice is done, our initial response is a spirit that says, ‘This is wrong. I need to do something,’” Pope said. “The challenge is that can turn into a riot. Unfortunately, democracy is mob-rule until it becomes a liberal democracy when we order that liberty.”

Although the discussion was geared to encourage students as to why freedom of speech can be a privilege in our country, it also addressed some students' fear that this free speech is not always a good thing for the country.

When the discussion turned to a time for student questions, panelist and assistant professor in history Drew Bledsoe attempted to ease fears and give reasons why the U.S. isn't facing an immediate threat of civil war. Bledsoe said, in the 1850s, the issues surrounding slavery didn't have room for compromise. Thus, a war was necessary.

“The issues we have today are complicated in some ways, and some are still related to race,” Bledsoe said. “But there’s still room for compromise between reasonable people who are willing to have hard conversations.”

Dr. Augustine closed the discussion with a call to action for US citizens.

“In our own humanity and vulnerability, it reminds us that we have more in common than the differences in which we are fixated,” Augustine said. “It becomes a constructive foundation for striving to meet each other in the middle.”

The next Roundtable event will be on April 12 at 6:00 pm in the Jones Lecture Hall and will offer discussion on the second amendment to the Constitution by several panelists of varying expertise.